

Like a Total Waste of Moscow  
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Bolotnaya Square is located on a sliver of an island in the Moscow River just south of the Kremlin wall. From its vast green expanse I can fit into one sweeping glance much that is iconic about Moscow. Onion dome cathedrals and Stalinist structures companion with towering old-growth trees, ornate pedestrian bridges and broad cobblestone promenades. Rich with history, Bolotnaya Square was an execution site from the earliest period of the Romanov Dynasty. Beheadings were the preferred mode there, but the open grassy space offered ample room for drawing and quartering fugitives, too. In 1775 Yemelyan Pugachev was the last person executed there. He'd led a revolt against the crown, even claiming to be the long-dead former tsar, Peter III, who had been murdered years before in a coup that swept Catherine the Great to power. For this, Pugachev received a double execution sentence: first he was beheaded, and then his corpse drawn and quartered.

Fast forward to 2011 and Bolotnaya Square became a place for speaking truth-to-power during the so-called Snow Revolution, when protesters came together to agitate for fair elections. Many of the Kremlin's structures were

visible to the demonstrators from their protest site, including the Ivan the Great bell tower, which for centuries was the tallest object in Moscow.

A large-scale bronze monument to painter Ilya Repin dominates one end of the Square next to the Repin Fountain, whose marble splash pool receives the cascade of numerous flute-like spouts. Repin painted “Ivan the Terrible and His Son Ivan on November 16, 1581,” a work that shows the Tsar cradling the bloody body of the tsarevich, his only heir, in the minute after he has in a fit of madness killed him. This tragedy kicked off a turbulent interregnum for Russia known as the Time of Troubles. The fate of a great nation fell in the deathblow of a single act. Ilya Repin was the first artist ever to reckon with that painful story line, and he did so 300 years after the fact. When his canvas was hung in Moscow’s Tretyakov Gallery in 1885 people fainted on the spot.

The other end of Bolotnaya Square is home to a sculptural assemblage of 15 life-sized figures by contemporary artist Mikhail Chemiakin—“Children Are the Victims of Adult Vices.” The installation received its own cascade of withering controversy in 2001 when oil industry giant Rosneft commissioned it. Drug addiction, Prostitution, Poverty, Sadism: bronze figures representing these evils surround two blindfolded children who are trying to play a game of Kick Ball. At first, citizens fretted over whether the art was too frank, too graphic for the public sphere. Never mind that Bolotnaya Square had been a witches’ brew of mixed intentions and visceral displays since its inception.

The word “bolotnaya” means marsh or swamp, and when the area was first named that captured exactly its soggy hydrology and its derelict look. Until Moscow got serious about diverting the drainage and digging a canal in 1785, the land was unusable.

Of course, when 21<sup>st</sup> Century Muscovites debated Chemiakin’s installation they weren’t thinking about swamplands, and they weren’t focused on the executions from long ago. They mainly saw the park-like space as family friendly. They weighed in, yay or nay, questioning whether something like Chemiakin’s disturbing art belonged in such a family friendly place.

That a playground full of colorful equipment stood alluringly right next to his installation was all the more unsettling.

*What is family? I wonder, gazing over at the playground. What is friendly?*

Bright blue climbers, red chin-up bars, yellow slides—the things that are guaranteed to draw children to a city park combine and recombine in the same panorama that includes the menacing figures representing War, Irresponsible Science and Child Labor.

With some art, you look only at it, the art, and not anything around it. Repin's canvas of Ivan the Terrible and his son Ivan hanging on a gallery wall in the Tretyakov Gallery is that type. But public art always engages in a dialogue with the immediate cityscape around it. The magnitude and scale of "Children Are the Victims..." is such that the effect of this engagement gets amplified.

Circling Chemiakin's installation at various angles so as to see everything, I find myself looking between the bronze figure that depicts Alcoholism and the donkey-headed one that depicts Ignorance. I'm looking past them to the teeter totter over there on the playground. A mother is balancing one end of the bright green plank while her toddler daughter rides up and down on the other end.

My gaze toggles between the teeter totter scene and the figure of War. He is bent slightly at the waist, like a butler, and wears a gas mask. In his stiffly outstretched arms he proffers a bomb that has the face of Mickey Mouse.

If you put what is "family" into a cauldron like Bolotnaya Square and then mix it all around with what is "friendly," this is the result. On a sheer energy level, it is the most woke spot in Moscow.

Altogether the 13 societal ills surround the two statues in the center, hapless blindfolded kids. The societal ills are bronze, the kids gold leaf gilding over bronze. Creeping in, the menacing figures reach out toward the kids with cloying hands and claustrophobically pincer arms. They create a Red Rover, Red Rover obstacle course that would be difficult for anyone to run through or escape, a confinement of sorts. A hip-high chain-and-post assemblage keeps the casual viewer from climbing into the installation and inhabiting its actual space. If you wanted to get in there you'd have to go to some trouble.

Children are not accidentally going to play there, in other words.

Moreover, a six-foot tall black iron fence encircles the structure. Its gate is locked at 10 p.m. and unlocked at 8 a.m. I'm struck by how well Moscow's Ministry of Parks has secured this site. A sign in both Cyrillic and English forbids entering the area of the sculpture. The sign even blocks what would be a

natural stepping stone threshold up toward the sculpture. When bouquets show up, an enduringly obvious display of empathy from the populace, the park's custodial crew places them on the circular granite dais on which the figures of the children stand, right next to their bronze kick ball. Numerous bouquets rest there on the day of my visit—blue roses with blue ribbons, pink gladioli, lemon-pale chrysanthemums.

I can believe that Chemiakin might have wanted people to step into his installation and interact with the figures, but I can also believe that the city saw the wisdom in disallowing that. I flash on *Il Porcellino* in Florence, the bronze boar in the *Mercato Nuovo* whose snout is shiny what with all the good luck pats it has received from visitors over many centuries. Moscow stopped something like that from starting up here before it could even get off the ground. No one was going to rub shiny a nose or an elbow or some other protruding body part—like one of Mickey Mouse's ears, for instance, on the bomb that War is cradling. The surface of the 13 bronze evils has patinated, untouched, to a dull greenish-black. Meanwhile, the child figures are kept polished to a glossy gilt sheen.

Wearing this outward patina of innocence, the kids try to play a game of Kick Ball, but on account of the blindfolds of course they can't even see the ball, can't see each other either. Instinctively, they hold their hands out, fingers splayed, as much to feel their way forward as to find each other. But it's 2 against 13. The predators have them trapped. The way the kids reach out makes clear that they know some kind of danger lies just beyond their fingertips. Someone has warned them about Stranger Danger—and they are on guard even while a part of them registers the fact that whoever the Strangers might be, whoever might be lurking out there in public, it's often the people they know who are the most dangerous: the uncle who volunteers to give them a bath, the much older cousin who offers to babysit, the neighbor who says, "Do you want to come inside?" These kids have not encountered the Stranger, but the likelihood that they have encountered a strangely dangerous and deceptive compulsion in someone familiar to them is high.

Standing before Chemiakin's art makes it tough to imagine kids playing a game of Kick Ball anywhere without predation.

And yet we know that they do, right?

The coach, the pediatrician, the teacher. Not all adults are overcome by vices. The scoutmaster, the circus clown, the preacher.

A retired gentleman is walking his terrier across Bolotnaya Square. Two women stroll arm in arm along the broad cobblestones, deep in conversation. It's the last week of winter, the sky promises brightness all day. Only a few scraps of snow linger about. A groundskeeper rakes up the leaves that have lain all season flattened under heavy drifts. On the sedate placid surface, one can say all is well. The days are lengthening. Spring is on the way.

But something lies coiled beneath Bolotnaya Square. Something lies coiled beneath Moscow. Who can rest?

Shouts from the playground punctuate the air. Kids are batting a tetherball to and fro, and a flash of sunlight sparks the metal chain from which the ball hangs. I watch, a little mesmerized by the repetitive actions.

Early childhood theorists posit that free spontaneous play, the kind that occurs amid jungle gyms, climbers and seesaws, is the most beneficial type. Professionals recognize that the social skills children develop on playgrounds often become lifelong resources from which they will draw in adulthood. In fact, the American Chief Medical Officer's report for the Department of Health in 2004 stated that physical activity reduces the risk of psychological problems in children and fosters their self-esteem. Self-esteem results from physical mastery of playground equipment. Even marginal and untended areas are deliberately built into quite elaborate and otherwise choreographed and well-coordinated playground constructions because an apparently neglected raggedy wasteland spot can inspire the imagination. The stick that becomes a scepter, the twine of honeysuckle vine that becomes a veil, the props that help one pretend.

A 20-something young man approaches Chemiakin's "Children Are the Victims..." camera in hand. Like most every visitor to the site he takes in the totality first, the gestalt, and then moves in as close as the fence will allow to examine individual pieces. He stops before the figure of For Those Without Memory and after a moment lifts his camera.

I follow the aim of his lens. It is trained on the only nonhuman form in Chemiakin's installation—a pillory whose hinged boards are mounted on a post. The bronze metal is fashioned to resemble wood-grain and to capture the rough-

hewn scrape of the saw blades that cut the “wood.” Although the pillory is not a person, it suggests the shape of one who would be forced to submit to this type of public humiliation. It’s obvious how a human body would have to stoop uncomfortably forward and hold that pose, sometimes for many hours, wrists clamped through holes on either end of the board. The person’s head would also be clamped through a neck hole. Focusing his camera, the young man snaps several frames. He zooms in. He zooms out.

Art is an ordering of reality, an ordering that brings meaning to our great heaping constantly accumulating inchoate mass of raw experience. Even in the seemingly random nature of all the over-heaped molecules, subatomic particles and everyday stuff that we bump into, touch, grab hold of or squeeze, art strains to tell a story. It insists on this telling. We need only tender forth a few ordinary details—the kick ball, the liquor bottle, the blindfold—and the story creates its own momentum from there, a compulsion of its own. Art is compelled to reveal.

When the young man has moved with his camera to the other side of Chemiakin’s installation, I step closer to *For Those Without Memory* and examine its detail. Sculpted into the bronze are snakes slithering up the pillory’s post. It is easy to imagine what would happen to someone held captive like that if snakes were indeed to begin slithering up the post, unable to move head or hands, unable to get away or get free. Back in the day, when devices like this were used in the public square, excited crowds showed up the instant they learned that the pillory was occupied. The word of mouth was intense. Some citizens were pillory devotees. I can imagine the unholy zeal on the faces of members of the crowd, the glee and fervor that churned as they rushed to the public square to pelt the poor brute pilloried there.

Rooted in its own bronze stillness, *For Those Without Memory* stripes a long shadow in the direction of the playground, as if to create a pathway. I see the kids over there. I see them building their skills on the slide, bolstering their self-esteem with the glider, exercising their imaginations by play-acting and pretending in the neglected weed-strewn shrubby space off to the side.

These installations, both the playground and Chemiakin’s, tell us a story about childhood. The playground version captures a sunny ideal: simple, boisterous, spirited play in bold primary colors. Chemiakin’s version captures a

dark truth: a play-place surrounded by predators. The truth inherent in Chemiakin's art is in fact a comment on our sunniest ideal, that of the carefree innocence we pray will envelop our kids.

A game of Kick Ball is never purely a game of Kick Ball in some ways.

Only someone lacking insight into human nature—unsuspecting and unaware—could relax among the jungle gyms, swings and gliders and really, really play. Some kind of fantasy allows us to believe that spontaneity and the sort of skill-building play which boosts confidence are possible in unsupervised public places.

I absorb this, riveted to the spot, as unmoving as one of these 13 vices.

We get busy, as parents, and we get tired. We grow weary of being so responsible. When someone steps up and says, Here, I'll help you, we gratefully accept, and we let down our burden. When we let down our burden, we let down our guard. The day before someone becomes a drug addict or a pedophile or a rageaholic is like the day before Ivan killed his son Ivan. The day before he became Terrible. It was going to happen. The elements were already in place. If it didn't happen on a Monday, it was going to happen on a Tuesday. Not *if*. When.

Here in late winter the trees in Bolotnaya Square have no leaves, so the lustrous gold dome of the Ivan the Great bell tower is highly visible between the figure that represents Theft and the one that represents Indifference. Ivan the Great was the grandfather of Ivan the Terrible, great-grandfather to the poor murdered tsarevich.

Children are indeed the victims.

And the fate of a nation can fall in the deathblow of a single act.

From the corner of my eye I catch a couple kids swinging on the playground, back and forth, back and forth. The motion is steady and pendulum-like, as if to reinforce that something hangs in the balance.

It is a bright day in early March, and my thoughts have tracked to a very dark place.

If you can't stand in Moscow and go to a dark place, that's like a total waste of Moscow.